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HENRY CLAY AND THE PROBLEM OF SLAVERY

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The politics of slavery absorbed an inordinate amount of Clay's time and energy from the 1790s when he first entered the political arena in Kentucky until his death more than fifth years later. It was one of the dominant themes of his career. Clay began his political career in 1798 in Kentucky as a strong supporter of emancipation and with no thought of connecting emancipation with colonization. He lost that fight and learned an important lesson. If he wanted to remain active in politics he would have to adopt a position on the slavery question that would be acceptable to slaveholding Kentucky and most of the slaveocracy of the South, a moderate position that would also appear progressive to many of his colleagues in the North. Thus, sometime between 1798 and 1817, when the American Colonization Society was launched, Clay came to advocate emancipation coupled with colonization. Yet, despite his inconsistency on the slavery question from time to time, he continued to regard slavery, at least in the abstract, as a social and political evil that should be exorcised from the body politic.

Clay thought that colonization was the best solution to the thorny problems of race and slavery. He urged free blacks to go to Liberia and encouraged individual slaveowners to emancipate their slaves for this purpose. Clay believed that free blacks and the difficulties they were surrounded by in the cities, along with the mischievousness of the abolitionists, operated as a check on voluntary emancipation, even for the purpose of transportation to Liberia. But he hoped, against hope, that free blacks would agree to go to Liberia and that as more and more slaves were emancipated, by voluntary acts of individuals and state action, that they also could be sent to Liberia. In this way eventually the problem of slavery could be solved, and the United States would become primarily a nation of white people.

In this position Clay had some distinguished company in Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln. Both of these men favored colonization. Jefferson, like Clay, believed that slavery was a moral and political evil and yet both Clay and Jefferson were large slaveowners. Both believed in kind and humane treatment for their slaves and tried to unite families whenever possible. They bought and sold slaves as necessity demanded; they "suspected" that blacks were inferior to whites, and they believed in colonization. Yet Jefferson's beliefs in regard to colonization were not strong enough to make him give up the comforts of Monticello by freeing his slaves provided they would go to Africa. Jefferson, throughout his life, only gave freedom to two of his slaves, and one of these purchased his liberty. Even in death the Sage of Monticello freed only five of his slaves out of a total of over two hundred sixty, with no provision being made for the gradual emancipation of children born to his slaves after his death. It has also been argued that Jefferson did not believe in emancipation unless it was coupled with colonization. This seems true enough. However, had this been the only obstacle to emancipation, it seems reasonable to assume that he could have freed those who were willing to relocate in Liberia.

Clay was in much the same position. As a leader of the American

Colonization Society and the Kentucky Colonization Society, Clay urged other slaveowners to free their slaves for transportation, and many did as he counselled. However, Clay did not free any of his slaves for this purpose. It is interesting to speculate why Clay did not practice what he preached. The answer seems to be political expediency. After all Clay was a perpetual candidate for the presidency. As he told James G. Birney in 1834, he had seen others, including himself in 1799, lost their political usefulness and popular influence by taking too strong an anti-slavery stance. Prince Hal also took much pride in Ashland–the seat of his wealth–and its good books, fine wines, and the generous hospitality that he lavished on his numerous visitors. Clay went to great lengths to preserve this estate during his lifetime. It provided Clay, like Monticello did Jefferson, with a very pleasurable life-style.

Lincoln was also acutely aware of the seriousness of the slavery problem. After the Civil War began Lincoln told a delegation of free black in August 1862, that if large numbers of the black race were not in the United States there would be no war. "Without the institution of slavery and the colored race as a basis, the war could not have an existence. It is better for us both, therefore, to be separated," Lincoln stated.[1] Even before 1862, Lincoln had made some strong statements on race and slavery. In a speech at Peoria, Illinois, in 1854, Lincoln said that his own feelings would not permit him to advocate freedom for the blacks "and make them politically and socially our equals." If his feelings would permit this, "we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not," Lincoln stated. In this speech Lincoln alluded to emancipation coupled with colonization as the only practical way to rid the nation of slavery, but he did concede that a "sudden execution" of the plan was impossible. Earlier in 1852, in his eulogy to Henry Clay, Lincoln had wished success to the colonizationists who wanted to send the black man back to his native land. If this could be accomplished, it would "indeed be a glorious consummation." These remarks and those at Charleston, Illinois, are most interesting, remarks that place Lincoln in the Clay "mold." In this debate with Senator Stephen A. Douglas, Lincoln declared that he was opposed to social and political equality for blacks. He believed that there was such a "physical difference between the white and black races" that this would forever forbid "the two races living together on terms of social and political equality." So long as blacks remained in America Lincoln favored the white race and assigned to it the superior position. Lincoln's basic views on black-white relations, George M. Fredrickson maintains, did not undergo a sudden change in the last year and a half of the Civil War.[2]

In this position Clay was one with Lincoln who urged this delegation of free blacks to remove themselves to Central America where they could enjoy equality. Lincoln maintained that while they were in America both races suffered because of the presence of the blacks. The Great Emancipator had just told this delegation that not a single man of their race was equal to a single man of the white race in America. But if they would remove themselves to Central America they could enjoy not only equality but by implication self-government as well. Thus, Lincoln urged removal as the final solution to the black problem,[3] a plan which was unrealistic and did not work. But Lincoln's ideas were very similar to those of Clay because Clay did not believe that blacks and whites could live together in the United States peacefully and on a plane of equality. By removing themselves to Africa they could, Clay stated, "enjoy the great blessings

of liberty, and sivic [*sic*], political, and social equality."[4]

In disparaging the abolitionists Clay was very harsh. He thought the two races could not live side by side in a state of equality; the abolitionists were advocating immediate freedom for the slaves and first class citizenship, and Clay could not see how this could ever work. To Clay such a situation would lead to a struggle between the two races and "would end in the extermination or subjugation of the one race or the other."[5] Thus, to urge immediate freedom and equal rights for blacks as the abolitionists were doing was a positive disservice to the slaves and the white man, and it caused a reaction that was an even greater injury to the free blacks. Besides, it was Clay's belief that abolitionist agitation harmed the cause of the slave greatly in that it offended the South and caused the passage of more stringent legislation concerning slavery and even reversed the trend for gradual emancipation in Kentucky. Prior to the abolition movement Clay believed that there was a "progressive melioration in the condition of slaves throughout all the slave states."[6]

The Kentucky politician had some distinguished company in regard to these views. Lincoln, who certainly did not support the institution of slavery, stated in 1837 that the institution was "founded on both injustice and bad policy, but that the promulgation of abolition doctrines tends rather to increase than to abate its evils."[7] James Buchanan, a future President, stated that the abolitionists had done more damage to slaves and freedmen, North and South, than any group in America. They had set back the course of constitutional emancipation, created more ardent anti-black attitudes in the North, forced the slave states to take more severe measures against both slaves and freedmen, and had created great danger to the Union.[8] Daniel Webster, speaking in 1850, declared that the operation of the abolition societies "for the last twenty years have produced nothing good or valuable."[9] Stephen A. Douglas agreed with this assessment and referred to the abolitionists as the "abolition faction, this disunion cabal, this set of men who make their reputation by slandering better men than themselves." To Douglas they never had been the true representatives of northern feeling.[10] To Clay, Lincoln, Buchanan, Webster, and Douglas the abolitionists were full of mischief, were misguided, and performed no useful service in advancing the cause of emancipation. Indeed, Clay painted a dark picture of the slavery problem because of what he considered the misguided efforts of the abolitionists.

Clay not only condemned the ideas of the abolitionists but also what he considered to be their unconstitutional methods. They would dissolve the Union if necessary to eliminate slavery; they would, in short, use any method or methods that would achieve this goal. Clay believed that the Constitution was a bulwark against the abolitionists. He maintained that no power was given to the federal government to abolish domestic slavery. Hence, under the tenth amendment this power resided with the states. In fact, Clay argued that the Constitution and the American Union would not have been created in 1787 if it had been made explicit that the federal government had the power to abolish slavery. Thus, Clay's states' rights view of the Constitution placed domestic slavery solely within the preserve of the states. They might have slavery or not as their sovereign people determined. John Quincy Adams, no friend of slavery, essentially agreed with Clay's views of the Constitution when he voted for a resolution in 1836 which stated that Congress had no constitutional right to

interfere in any way with slavery in the states and ought not to interfere with the institution of slavery in the District of Columbia.[11] However, Adams shortly came out in support for the abolition of the slave trade in the nation's capital and maintained that the federal government could even interfere with slavery in the states in time of insurrection or civil war. A few years later, in 1839, Adams introduced three proposed amendments to the Constitution into the House of Representatives that would eliminate slavery in the United States, forbid the admission of any new slave states into the Union except for Florida, and eliminate both the slave trade and slavery from the seat of government,[12] all of which by implication signify Adams's concurrence with Clay's constitutional views.

Others also agreed with these views. Buchanan believed that the federal government could legislate on the slavery question in the nation's capital and the territories, but had no jurisdiction over domestic slavery in the states. He stood for the abolition of the slave trade in the District of Columbia and a division of the Mexican Cession along the Missouri Compromise line between free soil and slavery interests. Like Clay and Webster he felt that the abolitionists, by their agitation of the slavery question, had put the Union in peril. They had, in short, postponed regular and constitutional emancipation "of the slaves in three or four States of the Union for at least half a century."[13] Lincoln also stated that "by our frame of government, the States which have slavery are to retain it, or surrender it at their own pleasure; and that all others–individuals, free-states and national government–are constitutionally bound to leave them alone about it." But he believed that Congress did have the constitutional power to legislate on the slavery question in the nation's capital and in the territories,[14] ideas that were similar to Clay's views even though they did disagree on how this power was to be used in the nation's capital and in the territories. Douglas likewise looked at the Constitution in essentially the same light as did Clay. In fact, he was closer to Clay than was Lincoln in implementing the admitted power of Congress to legislate for the territories and the nation's capital.[15]

Clay's role in 1849 and 1850, like his role in 1798 and 1799, does him great credit. In 1849 Clay urged the people of Kentucky, who would shortly hold a constitutional convention, to amend their constitution to provide for the gradual abolition of slavery and send the freedmen to Africa. This action, Clay maintained, would entail some sacrifice on the part of the slaveowners, but this would be counterbalanced by a general rise in the value of land and in a more stable and diligent labor force–free labor. Agriculture would be improved and the state would be able to attract more capital for industry, commerce, and agriculture. On the other hand, Kentucky would be helping the blacks by sending them to Africa where they could "enjoy the great blessings of liberty, and sivil (sic), political and social equality."[16] For these views, even though they were not adopted, Clay was condemned in the South as an abolitionist and in the North the abolitionists viewed his plan as a half-way measure. The abolitionists were correct in this assessment, but it is worth noting that this was the first time since 1799 that Clay had advocated a constitutional amendment in order to free the slaves of Kentucky. He was ahead of most of his fellow Kentuckians and southern slaveowners in this matter.

Also in 1850 Clay played a most statesmanlike role in trying to mediate–to compromise–the slavery issues that were so agitating the nation. He helped

defuse a most explosive situation, one that could quite possibly have led to the secession of the slaveholding South or at least that portion of the South that did secede after the election of Lincoln in 1860. Compromise was the right solution in 1850. Though Clay did not want civil war over the slavery question, his actions in 1850 gave the North ten more years to grow and prosper. When the Civil War did come the North was powerful enough to preserve the Union which Clay so loved. For this unintended result he may deserve some credit.

In playing the role of compromiser Clay was also instrumental in getting the doctrine of popular sovereignty accepted for the territories of New Mexico and Utah, a solution that only opened up the slim possibility of slavery expansion. The law of nature, as Clay, Webster, and Douglas maintained, did dedicate those territories to free labor. The Wilmot proviso was not necessary for that purpose, and slavery was not established in any meaningful way in those territories. Furthermore, Clay performed a not invaluable service in pushing the District of Columbia Slave Trade Bill to enactment, an act which eliminated one of the most unsavory aspects of the institution of slavery from the nation's capital. Thus, at the beginning of his political career and at the end of his career, when Clay had no great political ambition, he was more strongly antislavery in his views and actions.

But between these two poles Clay was not nearly so outspokenly antislavery in his attitude. This may be explained in part by his constitutional views, the vicious attacks of the abolitionists, the fact that he was one of the largest slaveowners in Kentucky, and the comforts of Ashland. But more important than these was political expediency. From 1824, with the exception of 1828, Clay was a perpetual candidate for the presidency. In order to survive politically, he had to be very wary on the slavery question, a caution that many politicians, including Jefferson, followed. In this century a good example of the Clay technique was Senator William Fulbright of Arkansas who was anti-civil rights to please his white constituents. This kept him in office so that he could follow a liberal policy in regard to the war in Vietnam and other foreign policy problems.[17] Clay, like Jefferson and Fulbright, had to live within the system and use it to his advantage. They reflected the will of the system in their section of the nation.

Had Jefferson strongly expressed many of his views on slavery as William Lloyd Garrison did, or if he had even gone as far as to suggest that whites and blacks should live together in the United States on the basis of equality, he would not have been able to do many of the things for which he was most proud and wished to be remembered for. In short, he would not have been elected President of the United States. It was not until 1860 that Lincoln, who was hostile to the expansion of slavery in the territories, was elected to the highest office in the land. Jefferson had to choose between his political "usefulness" and active opposition to slavery. He was a political pragmatist and relegated slavery to secondary importance in his list of priorities.[18] Clay did the same thing. As he told Birney in 1834 he had seen others champion antislavery too fervently and lose their political "usefulness" and popularity. Being a practitioner of the art of politics–the art of the possible–Clay did put the slavery question low on his list of priorities, this in spite of his genuine belief that slavery was a moral and political wrong. Had he done otherwise, Clay would undoubtedly have suffered politically.

Yet it can be argued that in many cases it is the man that shapes events and not events the man. Some have argued that Clay, more than any other man, led

the nation into war with England in 1812. Certainly his influence was great. It would seem that it is the true statesman that leads and in leading convinces his constituents of the correctness of his position. Given Clay's great popularity and influence nationwide and with the people of Kentucky, it seems a tragedy that he did not seriously try to convince the citizens of Kentucky that their racial prejudices were wrong as Birney wanted him to do in 1834. Had he made the effort and succeeded this could have possibly given great momentum to gradual emancipation in the other slave border states. This, if successful, could have finally put slavery on the road to final extinction and without the necessity of a great civil war to accomplish that goal.

Yet in spite of Clay's failure to act decisively he went to his grave with a real and abiding abhorrence for the institution of slavery. Unlike Jefferson, he was true to his belief in colonization because he made specific provision in his will for the gradual emancipation of children born to his slaves, with the express provision that they would be sent to Africa. To understand the real Henry Clay one must look at the beginning and the end of his political career. In fact, he was essentially hostile to slavery throughout his life. However, his love of Union was greater than his desire to see the slave free. He told Jacob Gibson that he had a higher duty to perform for the nation and the world "than even the extirpation of African slavery, however much its original introduction among us is to be deplored."[19]

Clay supported the Union. He knew the value of states' rights and paid homage to it at the proper moments. But it was his belief that the Union was an absolute necessity for all the states and for the future of mankind. In speaking of Clay, Lincoln put it this way: "Feeling as he did, and as the truth surely is, that the world's best hope depended on the continued union of these states, he was ever jealous of and watchful for whatever might have the slightest tendency to separate them."[20] Clay said the same thing in a way that would have done honor to Lincoln himself. He stated: "If any one desires to know the leading and paramount object of my public life, the preservation of the Union will furnish him the key."[21]

The Sage of Ashland would thus preserve the Union at all hazards. Yet he thought the problem of slavery would be eliminated given time. He did sincerely desire to see slavery abolished, but he wanted to see it done peacefully and constitutionally. If the Civil War could have been postponed indefinitely, it is just possible that his dream would have been fulfilled and in much less time than he envisioned.

NOTES

[1]Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 5:372, address to black delegation, August 14, 1862.

[2]*Ibid.*, 2:256, 132, Speech at Peoria, Illinois, October 16, 1854, and Eulogy on Henry Clay, July 6, 1852; *ibid.*, 3:145f, debate with Douglas, September 18, 1858; George M. Fredrickson, "A Man but Not a Brother: Abraham Lincoln and Racial Equality," *Journal of Southern History*, XLI (February 1975), pp. 39-58. For an opposing view see G.S. Boritt, "The Voyage to the Colony of Linconia," *The Historian*, 37 (August 1975), pp. 619-632 and Don E. Fehrenbacher, "Only His Stepchildren: Lincoln and the Negro," *Civil War History*, XX (December 1974), pp. 293-310. Boritt and Fehrenbacher do not see Lincoln as being in the Clay "mold" concerning colonization. They maintain that Lincoln was not serious about the colonization of free blacks in Central America, the Caribbean, or anywhere else. Colonization never became "a great cause for him." Once emancipation was decided upon Lincoln "turned to making black

men into soldiers and citizens–but always moving with caution." He was applying the technique of avoidance to this problem, Boritt maintains, in order to satisfy the northern white masses who feared the North would be inundated with southern blacks after emancipation. Thus, the colonization idea had great political value to Lincoln. Fehrenbacher claims that Lincoln's Charleston remarks and others made elsewhere did not represent his true beliefs as they were made under great pressure. Had he not made them "the Lincoln of history would not exist." Fehrenbacher maintains that if Lincoln had not been assassinated he would have continued to be closer to the Sumners than to the conservatives. Hence, he would not have pushed colonization.

[5]Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 5:370-375, Lincoln's address on colonization to a deputation of free blacks at the White House, August 14, 1862.

[6]Clay to Richard Pindell, February 17, 1849, The Papers of Henry Clay, The University of Kentucky.

[7]*African Repository and Colonial Journal*, 68 vols. (Washington: James C. Dunn, 1834), 6:144f.

[8]Daniel Mallory, compiler and editor, *Life and Speeches of the Honorable Henry Clay*, 2 vols. (New York: Robert P. Bixby and Company, 1843), 2:355-375, Clay's speech to the Senate, February 7, 1839.

[9]Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 1:74f, protest in the Illinois legislature on Slavery signed by Lincoln, March 3, 1837.

[10]Philip S. Klein, *President James Buchanan: A Biography* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1962), p. 215.

[11]*Congressional Globe*, 31st Congress, 1st session (Washington: John C. Rives, 1850), Appendix, pp. 269-276; Irving H. Bartlett, *Daniel Webster* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1978), p. 248; Richard W. Current, *Daniel Webster and the Rise of National Conservatism* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1955), p. 165; Herbert Darling Foster, "Webster's Seventh of March Speech and the Secession Movement, 1850," *American Historical Review*, XXVII (January 1922), pp. 245-270.

[12]Gerald M. Capers, *Stephen A. Douglas: Defender of the Union* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1959), pp. 42, 117.

[13]*Register of Debates*, 24th Congress, 1st session (Washington: Blair and Rives, 1836), XII, Pt. II, pp. 2491-2498.

[14]Samuel Flagg Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and The Union* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), pp. 331f, 336-339, 349ff, 380f.

[15]Klein, *President James Buchanan: A Biography*, pp. 147-150, 211-216, 255-256.

[16]Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 1:74f, protest in the Illinois legislature on slavery, March 3, 1837; Ibid., 2:20ff, 226-286, 300f, resolution and remarks by Lincoln in support of the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia and various Lincoln letters on the Kansas-Nebraska Act; Ibid., 3:327f, Lincoln to James N. Brown, October 18, 1858.

[17]Robert W. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 24, 55, chapters 10-13; Gerald M. Capers, *Stephen A. Douglas: Defender of the Union* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1959), pp. 42-46, 48, 52-65; George D. Harmon, "Douglas and the Compromise of 1850," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, XXI (January 1929), pp. 453-499.

[18]Clay to Richard Pindell, February 17, 1849, The Papers of Henry Clay.

[19]William Fulbright, *The Arrogance of Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).

[20]John C. Miller, *The Wolf By The Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), p. 278f.

[21]Calvin Colton, ed., *Works of Henry Clay*, 7 vols. (New York: Henry Clay Publishing Company, 1897), 4:465f, Clay to Gibson, July 25, 1842.

[22]Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 2:126, Lincoln's eulogy on Henry Clay, July 6, 1852.

[23]Clay to S.F. Miller, July 1, 1844, in Colton, *Works of Henry Clay*, 4:491.